

Matthew 13:31-35
Big Things from Subtle Beginnings
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Good morning, church! It's great to be with you.

I wonder if you've ever felt, like I have, like you don't know or don't understand what God's doing in the world. Does it ever seem to you like he's not doing much of anything? Have you found yourself wishing he would do more that was visible and apparent? Maybe you're not a Christian, but you're curious, and you wish it was more obvious that he exists and that he's good and that he's in control. Have you found yourself longing for God to show up, to make himself known, to bring to bear on the world his justice and peace and righteousness and healing?

I think we feel these longings in huge, cosmic ways, and in very small, personal ways.

Maybe you're feeling it with the numerous atrocious wars going on around the world, and you just wish the fighting would stop. You wish God would step in with his peace and stop the innocent and vulnerable from dying.

Maybe you feel like your family or friends are really struggling, and you wish God would heal them and encourage them and draw them to himself, but you haven't seen any signs of hope for a while.

Maybe you're feeling stuck. Maybe your schoolwork or your job feels mundane and repetitive. You wish you felt God moving, acting in some way, you wish you felt more godly purpose, but everyday feels the same.

It's easy to feel these things, I think. It's easy to feel like God isn't doing what you think he should be doing. What's supposed to be happening isn't happening.

These longings that we have – longings for God's justice, peace, righteousness, healing – they're good things, and God cares about all of them.

We're going to look at a couple more parables this morning, and we're going to see how a tiny little seed and a hunk of dough offer some perspective on these big questions we have around what God's doing in the world, and our longing for him to show up.

We're delighted to have Al read the Scripture for us this morning. It's going to be Matthew 13:31-35. That's Matthew chapter 13, verses 31-35. Heavenly Father, I pray that by your Holy Spirit you would help us both to understand and to obey your Word this morning, so that we might become more like Jesus. In his name and for his sake, amen.

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables,

I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world."

Thank you, Susan. So we have these two short parables in vv. 31-33, and then in vv. 34-35 we have this bit about Jesus's use of parables in his teaching. And we will get to the parables, but we're going to go out of order and cover vv. 34-35 first, because they explain part of Jesus's purpose in using these parables. So if we understand his purpose first, that'll help give us the right lens to understand the parables themselves.

If it helps you to have a little road map of where we're going this morning, we've got three stops on our journey. First, as I said, we'll look at the purpose of the parables. Second, we'll look at the parables in context. And third, we'll look at the parables for us. The purpose of the parables, the parables in context, and finally the parables for us.

First, the purpose of the parables. V. 34 says, “**Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable.**” Now, this doesn’t mean that everything he ever said to the crowds was in parable form, as if he never taught any other way. We’ve already seen that’s not true, with the Sermon on the Mount, for example. It just means that Jesus made a habit of using parables in his teaching. Parables were essential to his teaching ministry. Whenever he taught people, parables were part of it.

Why was this? Well, in v. 35, Matthew tells us that Jesus taught this way to fulfill “**what was spoken through the prophet,**” who said, “**I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.**” Matthew loves to do this. He loves to show how Jesus fulfills the promises and the story of the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament.

Here he’s quoting from Psalm 78. Psalm 78 is long, and we don’t have time to read it, but in this poem the prophet Asaph describes how God interacted with his ancient Israelite people at different points in their history. And by doing this, Asaph identifies patterns that weren’t obvious otherwise.

For example, he talks about the Exodus where God miraculously rescued the people from slavery in Egypt, and how after that, time and time again, the people complain or disobey or rebel against God. And yet, time and time again, God is faithful to his people. He does bring temporary judgment or discipline, but there’s always mercy at the end. This is a subtle pattern that people who were alive at that time could have easily missed, but Asaph brings it to the forefront. That’s why he says he’s uttering hidden things.

Ok, are you with me? Asaph identifies patterns of how God is at work in the world with his people.

Matthew’s saying that this is what Jesus is doing with his parables. Jesus’s parables reveal the patterns of how God is at work in the world. Except, instead of talking about Israelite history, Jesus is talking about himself. Most of Jesus’s parables are about Jesus bringing the Kingdom of God, and about the timing and nature of that kingdom. These things are said to have been hidden because without Jesus’s teaching, they’re not obvious. Just like with Asaph, these are patterns that the people in the crowd could have easily missed without Jesus explaining them. And like the crowds, we too need Jesus’s explanations of how God works in the world so that we don’t miss out on these important patterns.

The other reason Matthew says that Jesus is uttering “**things hidden since the creation of the world**” is because something entirely new is happening in Jesus. It’s a new era of God’s redemptive work with his people, and that requires new revelation. It requires new communication.

With that said, the fact that Jesus’s parables are meant to reveal the patterns of God’s work in the world doesn’t mean that the parables are easy to understand. They’re not straightforward. They make you think. They usually prompt more questions than they answer. We saw earlier in Matthew 13, in vv. 10-16, that there’s a concealing element to Jesus’s parables. People who are hard-hearted, people who are already skeptical of or opposed to Jesus, won’t respond well to the parables and they’ll only become more distant from God. If you want a refresher on that, Ian gave a great talk just before Easter that would be helpful to look back at.

So, on the one hand, the parables conceal. But our passage this morning shows that Jesus’s parables also reveal. Jesus’s parables reveal God’s patterns of working in the world. That’s what they’re meant to do. That’s their purpose. Jesus’s parables reveal God’s patterns of working in the world.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast are no exception. So let’s look at these parables in context.

To understand the context, I’m wondering if you’ll play a little game with me where we put ourselves in the shoes of Jesus’s listeners. I want you to pretend – you can close your eyes if that helps – I want you to pretend you’re a Jewish farmer or fisherman or shopkeeper living in Israel. It’s around the year 30 AD, and you’re living under Roman occupation. You see Roman soldiers every day, walking the streets of your homeland. You have to pay so much in taxes that you’re barely surviving. Maybe you’re deep in debt. You feel almost hopeless.

But because you’re a devout Jew at this time in history, you grew up on the stories of the Old Testament, and you know that the prophets, like Isaiah, promised that God would one day bring salvation to his people again. He would overthrow his enemies and restore his kingdom. So you hold out a little hope, just waiting for that time to come.

And then, one day, you hear about this new teacher. His name is Jesus, they tell you, and he says he’s bringing the Kingdom of God! So when he comes to your town, you go to see him. His teaching is amazing, and he even healed one of your friends who was really, really sick. And you think, “This could be it!”

But a few weeks pass, and then a few months. And the same soldiers are still all over your town. One of them shoved you yesterday, and you fell over and broke your favorite pot. And now your taxes are due, and you have no idea where you're going to come up with the money. And you say to yourself, "I guess that Jesus guy wasn't the one after all. I guess the Kingdom's not here yet."

Now, obviously this is just an imaginative exercise, but I think it can help us understand a bit of the attitude that Jesus was speaking to. The Jewish people desperately wanted God to restore his kingdom and free them from the demoralizing oppression that was their everyday existence. They were longing for God to show up, like we do. But Jesus's ministry wasn't materializing the kind of kingdom progress they were hoping for.

So with that in mind, let's look at the first parable. "**The kingdom of heaven,**" Jesus says, "**is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.**"

Now, if you're being technical, there are a few seeds that are smaller than the mustard seed. But during that time, mustard seeds were known proverbially for their small size. It was common to refer to them to talk about how small something was. That's all Jesus is doing here. It's kind of like how we use ants today. Ants aren't technically the smallest insect, Google tells me that's the fairyfly, but when we're trying to describe how small something looks from far away, we often say it looks like an ant. Nonetheless, mustard seeds are tiny. The diameter of one seed is about 1mm, and you'd need more than 500 of them to weigh even one gram.

And they go from tiny to huge! A full-grown mustard plant of this kind would easily get 2.5-3 meters tall. They're perfect for birds because the birds are drawn to the plants' seeds, and because they have big leaves that provide shade.

What's interesting is these plants don't actually become a tree. So did Jesus make a mistake? No he didn't. And I'll tell you why. Jesus isn't trying to give us a lesson on plants, he's trying to make an important point. And to do that, he purposefully uses imagery that connects to the Old Testament. The image of a tree with birds nesting or finding shade in its branches is a common image in the Old Testament. It comes up a couple times in the book of Ezekiel and once in the book of Daniel. That's why Jesus uses the language of the mustard seed becoming a tree, because he wants to import the significance of the imagery from Ezekiel and Daniel.

Right, so how does the image function in Ezekiel and Daniel? Well, each time the image comes up, the tree represents a supremely powerful nation, a world power. And the birds in its branches, along with other animals, represent the smaller allies of that powerful nation who benefit from its rule and protection. So when Jesus's listeners heard him talk about God's Kingdom becoming a tree with birds perched in its branches, they would have understood Jesus to be teaching that, in the end, when it's fully grown, God's Kingdom would rule over all, and it would be a great blessing to all who aligned themselves with it.

But that's not how it starts. It starts as small as a mustard seed. And that's the whole point. The point is that the kingdom people are waiting for – the one that will eventually show itself to be the glorious, immense, eternal Kingdom of God – that kingdom has what seems to be a small or insignificant beginning. In other words, don't be thrown off that Jesus's ministry hasn't started with the kind of bang that people were hoping for. Don't be thrown off that the Roman soldiers are still walking the streets. God's Kingdom has arrived in Jesus. It hasn't brought about exactly what the people want in the moment, but God's Kingdom has arrived in Jesus. It's started small, like a mustard seed, but it will grow, and it will fulfill all their deepest longings. God's Kingdom is good, and those who align themselves with God's Kingdom through Jesus will experience its goodness. They'll experience the loving rule and protection and blessing of God in his way, in his timing.

How about the second parable? Jesus says, "**The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough.**"

That's a lot of dough – about all one woman could feasibly knead at one time. It'd be enough to feed somewhere between 100-150 people. I mean, this is massive. And what's interesting here is where it says that the woman *mixed* the yeast into the flour. That's not a bad translation to describe the kneading process, but the Greek word actually means 'to hide.' Jesus says the woman hid the yeast in the flour. And yet...even though it's hidden, and you can't see its effects, the yeast works to transform all the dough.

This isn't so different from the parable of the mustard seed. Despite its hidden beginning and imperceptible growth and transformation, the Kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus, and it will have its

complete effect. One commentator describes the significance of the parable this way: “A hidden power, hardly discernible to some, is already and irresistibly working.”

So in their original contexts, these two parables work together to address the doubt and uncertainty about Jesus’s ministry as it relates to God’s Kingdom. He’s not reestablishing a political kingdom in Israel, but he is bringing God’s Kingdom. He’s bringing the Kingdom in unexpected, even unnoticed ways. It’s starting small, it’s coming discretely, but it’s here. And for those whose humble hearts were open to learning from Jesus, these parables would have been a source of great hope and encouragement.

Others, though, would have experienced the concealing effect of the parable. Jesus is presenting a surprising, upside-down idea about the timing and nature of the Kingdom, and people who were already skeptical of Jesus would have been turned off by that. If you’re desperate for the Romans to stop occupying your land, and you just can’t bear to visit the tax collector’s booth one more time, then this promise of a kingdom that comes subtly isn’t very comforting.

This is helpful for us too, because sometimes God’s Kingdom isn’t what we would want or expect even at this point in time. Even now, 2,000 years of church growth later, we feel some of the tension the original listeners may have felt.

This is because Jesus’s parables here force a decision of sorts. He’s claiming that the Kingdom of God has arrived with him, and that naturally requires people to examine their relationship with Jesus. We’re faced with that same decision. These parables force us to examine our relationship with Jesus and his Kingdom. Will we trust him? Will we trust his Kingdom is good and that it’s coming in his timing to bring his justice and peace and righteousness and healing? Will we accept the incredible hope and encouragement that he offers?

Or will we be skeptics? Will we allow the lack of the kind of visible results that we want to see make us distrust him and dismiss his promises?

That can be tempting, because even though the Kingdom is here, it’s not fully here yet. We’ve yet to see the fullness of what God’s Kingdom will look like. We’ve yet to see the full-grown mustard tree. The yeast hasn’t yet worked through all the dough. And as we talked about at the start, that can be discouraging. But one day it will come in all its fullness, and it’ll be more glorious than anything you can imagine.

This starts to get into the impact of the parables for our lives. We talked about the purpose of the parables, we talked about the parables in context, now let’s talk about the parables for us.

We said before that Jesus’s parables reveal God’s patterns of working in the world, and this is certainly true for the parables of the mustard seed and yeast. These parables reveal that God works big things from subtle beginnings. God works big things from subtle beginnings.

Now, this wonderful truth could lead us in all sorts of directions. I’ll share some ideas to get your wheels spinning, but I want to invite you to use your creativity to live it out however you feel led.

I mentioned that tension that we often feel – the tension that things aren’t what we hope they’d be. And, although things are not yet what they should be in our broken world, these parables give us the great assurance that God’s Kingdom work is happening. It’s been happening. It may be subtle, and it may be in places and in ways that we wouldn’t expect, but it’s happening, and it’s brought about amazing good in the world.

One incredible example of this is the early church. Despite most early Christians being on the margins of society, their unusual compassion caused the church to grow rapidly. They cared for those who were sick – not only for one another but for outsiders. During times of plague, they were known for remaining present and tending to those who were infected rather than trying to escape or avoid all contact like most did. They dignified women in ways that were radical for their time. They didn’t kill baby girls, which was a common practice. They held men to the same standards of purity and faithfulness that they held women to. They rescued and adopted babies, both girls and boys, who had been discarded. They welcomed strangers with sacrificial hospitality. All of these acts of obedience and compassion served as a powerful testimony and constantly drew more people to faith in Jesus. God’s Kingdom was making a difference.

A modern example of this is the explosion of the church in the places we’d least expect. Do you know which nation has the fastest-growing evangelical movement in the world today? It’s Iran, where it’s literally illegal to convert to Christianity. God is doing amazing things in Iran. It’s subtle, but it’s happening.

One more example. The person that first shared the gospel with my wife was a high school physics teacher named Steve Paulson. He’s a kind man that lives his life with integrity. Bella could tell he was different. So, one day, she asked why. This eventually led him to share that he was different because of his hope in Jesus.

Bella went on to fall in love with Jesus and has since had people ask her that same question – why are you different? And she gets to tell them about the hope she has in Jesus. And Bella's just one of many students Steve Paulson has been able to share the gospel with. His unassuming witness as a schoolteacher is part of God's Kingdom spreading subtly but meaningfully. There's no way to even measure the massive ripple effects that that has had and will continue to have. God's Kingdom is here, and it's good.

As we wrestle with the tension of what God's Kingdom looks like in our broken world, let these examples inspire us to get in the game. Although God's Kingdom may be coming subtly now, one day we'll witness it in all its glory, and we'll realize that all along it was the only thing that ever really mattered. We can live today, and everyday, with hope and with great purpose, because the good news of God's Kingdom changes everything. It enables us to look at brokenness in the world and see that, not only is this not how the story ends, but we actually have the power to heal some of that brokenness through Jesus.

So let's press on with God's kingdom work, even when it feels small, even when it goes unnoticed, even when it feels like it's not making a difference. You never know what God will do. You never know what big things he'll bring about from our small steps of faithful obedience.

God works big things from subtle beginnings, and because of that we press on. And because of that we wait with sure hope for the resurrected King to return, to give us eyes to see like he sees, and to show us the tree that's been growing – the yeast that's been spreading all the time. And when that day comes, we're going to be in awe of our great God.

Let's pray.